President Barack Obama, campaigning to shave Republican gains in Congress, arrives in his adopted hometown today to defend one of this election season’s most coveted jewels: his old U.S. Senate seat.

The president’s Chicago appearances at two fundraising events for Alexi Giannoulias mark his second visit in as many months for the Democrat seeking the post Obama once held. First lady Michelle Obama is scheduled to stop home next week to boost Giannoulias.

The first family’s efforts illustrate the struggle polls show Democrats face in keeping control of all statewide offices in Illinois. Their visits could rekindle local interest in the Senate race that has faded amid an unexpected mayoral race that may feature Obama’s former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel.

“We’ve been distracted,” said Alan Gitelson, a political science professor at Loyola University Chicago. “He takes a personal interest in the inheritance of his seat. It’s not only important to him personally, but also symbolically in terms of how the media and public would look at a loss.”

Mark Kirk, the Republican nominee, and Giannoulias have spent much of their campaign debating who is the more scandalized. Giannoulias has dealt with fallout from the failure in April of a bank his family ran, while Kirk was forced to apologize for repeatedly exaggerating his biography.

Giannoulias, 34, is the Illinois state treasurer and an occasional Obama basketball buddy, while Kirk, 51, is a five-term congressman from Chicago’s northern suburbs. The two are scheduled to debate this weekend on NBC’s “Meet the Press.”

Pat Brady, chairman of the Illinois Republican Party, told reporters on a conference call today that Obama’s visit is the equivalent of a Republican president needing to rally his political base in a state like Alabama three weeks before an election.

“They’re burning a lot of jet fuel flying into Illinois,” said Brady, who’s no relation to the party’s gubernatorial nominee. “If they have to bring in this kind of horsepower in a state like Illinois, which has been blue for a while, then the party in general is in trouble.”

Brady noted the state’s 10.1 percent unemployment rate in August, Illinois government’s $6.1 billion in unpaid bills and the fact that it has the largest retirement underfunding among U.S. states.

“It could not get any worse in Illinois, and the blame for that mess rests solely on the Democrats,” he said.

The return of Emanuel to Illinois has motivated Republicans, Brady said.
“Every time he pops up, that helps both motivate our base, and it helps my fundraising,” he said.

Emanuel’s potential campaign to replace retiring Mayor Richard M. Daley has already drawn one White House staffer back to Chicago. Ben LaBolt, one of Obama’s longest serving press aides, said he would return home later this month to handle Emanuel’s communications efforts.

Robert Gibbs, Obama’s press secretary, told reporters yesterday that Obama had no plans to see Emanuel during his visit. Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, a Democrat trailing in polls against Republican state Senator Bill Brady, will travel with the president from O’Hare International Airport to downtown Chicago, Gibbs said.

Obama’s investment of political capital and prestige in the Senate race in Illinois matches what he has put into the campaign for Senator Barbara Boxer of California. Boxer is near the top of the Republican target list.

Dialing for Votes

Plans also call for Obama to record automated phone calls for Giannoulias next week, said a Democratic official who didn’t want to be named for fear of angering the White House.

Since June, Giannoulias has had fundraising visits from Vice President Joe Biden, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Obama senior adviser David Axelrod, White House Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Messina and 2008 presidential campaign manager David Plouffe, who is helping the administration in the midterm elections.

Kirk has banked about $5 million worth of advertisements for the final weeks of the campaign, spokeswoman Kirsten Kukowski said. The advertising will be paid for by his campaign fund and the National Republican Senatorial Committee, she said.

Kathleen Strand, a Giannoulias spokeswoman, declined to provide a comparable figure for his campaign.

Outside Influence

Outside groups and political parties have invested heavily in the race. They spent about $3.4 million in Illinois last month, Federal Election Commission records show. That made it the fourth-most active state for independent expenditures, which aren’t coordinated with candidates, after Missouri, Colorado and Pennsylvania.

Obama’s Chicago visit is part of a White House effort to fight a tide in November’s congressional elections that threatens Democratic control of the House and possibly the Senate. The party’s loss of the Illinois seat would boost Republican chances of gaining the 10 needed to win a Senate majority.

A Rasmussen Reports poll taken Oct. 4 showed Kirk with a statistically insignificant lead, 45 percent to 41 percent, in a survey with a 4 percentage-point margin of error.

A Chicago Tribune/WGN-TV poll taken Sept. 24-28 showed Giannoulias held a statistically insignificant lead of 38 percent to 36 percent. That survey, which showed 17 percent undecided, also had a 4 percentage-point error margin.
Third-Party Impact

Both polls showed lesser-known candidates in the race could play a role, because the margin between the Republican and Democratic candidates appears close. Green Party candidate LeAlan Jones received 5 percent, while Libertarian candidate Mike Labno drew 3 percent in the Tribune’s poll.

At stake is Obama’s agenda over the next two years as Republicans try to turn House and Senate races into a referendum on the president, whether it’s over stimulus spending, automaker and bank bailouts, or health care.

The president has warned a Republican takeover might mean a 20 percent reduction in education funding, the elimination of clean-energy incentives and the scaling back of health-care overhaul.

Obama Trips

Obama’s sixth trip to Chicago since his inauguration in January 2009 comes as Broadway Bank, the now-defunct institution Giannoulias’s family operated, has been in the headlines again because of a Sept. 29 Tribune story that reported on a $2.7 million tax deduction the candidate took last year.

Giannoulias has said that he left the troubled bank in late 2005, although his tax documents showed he claimed to have worked at least 500 hours there in 2006, a time when loans were made to Antoin “Tony” Rezko, who was later convicted of influence peddling, and to a family later accused of having connections to organized crime.

Obama netted about $1 million for Giannoulias when they last appeared together in Chicago on Aug. 5. Giannoulias raised less than half as much as Kirk during the quarter that ended June 30, the most recent total available, and had about one-fourth as much in the bank.